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BREAKING RANKS

## Shrink Government, the Right Tells the Right

By **SHERYL GAY STOLBERG**

**W**ASHINGTON — Sue Myrick set her sights high when she came to Washington in the heady days after the election of 1994. Republicans had reclaimed control of the House after 40 years in the political wilderness, and Representative Myrick was eager to eliminate government programs, balance the budget and cut overall spending — in short, to shrink big government.

Today, with her party in charge of both Congress and the White House, Mrs. Myrick would seem perfectly positioned to achieve those goals. Instead, she and her fellow fiscal conservatives are still fighting to reduce government spending - a battle that pits them against their own party and president.

"We've put up with this spending, very frankly, for the last few years and none of us feel very good about it," said Mrs. Myrick, a North Carolina Republican. "It's very difficult when you have a president of your same party, if they aren't as fiscally conservative as you would like them to be."

These are not easy times for lawmakers who hold dear the notion that, as Ronald Reagan used to say, government should get off the people's backs. The balanced budget of the 1990's, which Mrs. Myrick considers a high point of her Congressional career - is gone, replaced by a record federal deficit. Senator John McCain, the Arizona Republican, complained earlier this year that Congress was spending money like "drunken sailors."

Rather than shrink the role of the federal bureaucracy, fiscal conservatives say President Bush has expanded it, in education, agriculture and through the \$400 billion, 10-year Medicare prescription drug bill.

"At this point, I think that conservatives sold out their small government philosophy and replaced it with a philosophy of whatever will get them re-elected," said Brian M. Riedl, a budget analyst at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative research organization. "Neither party is committed to smaller government and less spending. Those who are still standing for fiscal conservatism are frustrated."

That frustration is starting to boil over, and as Mr. Bush prepares his budget for 2005, fiscal conservatives on Capitol Hill are "searching for ways to stop the spending spree," Mr. Riedl said.

Several proposals are floating around. In October, Representative Jeb Hensarling, a Texas Republican, introduced the Family Budget Protection Act, which would require Congress to meet budget targets to eliminate the federal deficit in five years. Representative Paul Ryan, Republican of Wisconsin, wants to reform the government's accounting practices to provide a more accurate picture of federal spending.

"It's safe to say that there is tremendous dissatisfaction and a kind of dawning on people that Bush is not interested in smaller government," said Edward H. Crane, president of the Cato Institute, a libertarian

research organization.

Mrs. Myrick, who is chairwoman of the Republican Study Committee, a group of 96 House members committed to fiscal conservatism, said the committee was planning a retreat in Annapolis, Md., at the end of this month to draft a strategy that will then be presented to the entire House Republican caucus. Another study committee member, Representative Gil Gutknecht of Minnesota, says he is optimistic that fellow Republicans will be open to their ideas.

Mr. Bush, of course, has faced a series of events - recession, the bursting of the stock market bubble and, most importantly, the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 - that have pushed up federal spending, particularly on defense and homeland security. Joshua B. Bolten, the White House budget director, says growth has been modest in other areas, just 3 percent in discretionary spending between 2003 and 2004.

"I think the president has actually hewed closely to conservative fiscal principles," Mr. Bolten said.

But Mr. Riedl calculates the growth at 9 percent, not 3 percent, and says federal spending in 2003 exceeded \$20,000 per household for the first time since World War II. During the 1990's, he says, it held steady at slightly less than \$18,000.

"There is a growing frustration within the House caucus - and it's palpable - of members' saying, 'We can't continue to call ourselves fiscal conservatives with big deficits and growing entitlements,' " Mr. Gutknecht said. "I think the events surrounding Sept. 11 and other international events clouded our vision, but I think those clouds are starting to clear."

But some say the Republican vision was clouded long before the 2001 terrorist attacks. Mr. Riedl of the Heritage Foundation harks back to 1995, when Congressional Republicans shut down the federal government over a budget impasse with President Bill Clinton. The shutdown came off as petty and mean-spirited, and voters blamed the Republicans, led by former House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

"When the government shutdown hurt them politically," Mr. Riedl said, "they declared spending cuts to be the new third rail of Republican politics."

In a recent article in the Cato Policy Report, Mr. Crane goes back even farther, to President Reagan's 1984 re-election effort and its feel-good "Morning in America" campaign, which, he argues, "missed an incredible opportunity to capitalize on an enormously popular president by laying out specific programs to shrink the federal government."

But Mr. Crane blames President Bush for "the philosophical collapse of the G.O.P." He complains that Mr. Bush ran for office in 2000 without calling for a single spending cut- a point that Mr. Bolten, the White House budget director, does not dispute.

"The president campaigned as conservative who favors limited government but activism in those areas where government is going to spend money and has responsibilities," Mr. Bolten said. "I think he has followed through on the philosophy on which he campaigned, which I think is a good conservative philosophy."

On Capitol Hill, Mr. Bush's brand of Republicanism has put some lawmakers in a bind, caught between their loyalty to the president, their party's Congressional leaders and their fiscal principles. Mrs. Myrick, for instance, voted for the Medicare bill, even though she said she was uneasy about it. Mr. Gutknecht was among nine Republicans who voted against it, despite relentless pressure from the Republican

leadership. So was Representative Marilyn Musgrave, a freshman Republican from Colorado whose first telephone call from President Bush was a plea for support on Medicare.

"To have to say no is tough," she said, adding, "But it's easier to look yourself in the mirror."

Democrats, meanwhile, are enjoying the divisions among Republicans. "All of the conservatives who spent so much time in the 80's and 90's inveighing against the deficit are demonstrating the worst kind of hypocrisy," said Howard Wolfson, a Democratic campaign strategist.

Yet even Mr. Wolfson conceded that the deficit is unlikely to make a compelling issue for Democrats during the 2004 campaign. And Mr. Bush's conservative critics are aware that they have nowhere else to go. Mr. Crane, for one, laments the absence of a conservative primary opponent for Mr. Bush. Already, he is looking forward to the next presidential race.

"There is going to be a real battle for the soul of the Republican party in 2008," he predicted, "because the free-market types, the limited government types, realize they have been sold a bill of goods with Bush. And they are not going out without a fight."